

POWER AND LOVE VERSUS DEATH: “DEATH CONSTANT BEYOND LOVE” BY GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ

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Abstract: *This article analyses the philosophy and literary aesthetics of Gabriel García Márquez’s political satire with reference to his short story, “Death Constant beyond Love.” The analysis is based on the author’s views concerning the common personality traits, actions and ends of tyrannical rulers made manifest in the main character of the story – Senator Onesimo Sanchez. It is observed that the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius’ meditations on the transience of existence, and the mortality of man serve as the backdrop to the power-drunk Senator’s vain attempts to keep exercising his tyranny despite his awareness of his looming death. The story’s central theme is that misused political power – no matter how wide its scope – is limited by man’s transient corporeal existence, or by death, to put it more simply. The author’s reflections upon dishonest politicians as fictionalized in the Senator display how corruption defiles each individual in society. The discussion on the nature and ramifications of man’s boundless ambition for power also draws on Nietzsche’s will to power/will to life equation, and Foucault’s views on resistance-freedom/power proposition.*

Keywords: *Gabriel García Márquez, short story, political satire, tyrannical power, death*

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Suppose that a god announced you that you were going to die tomorrow or the day after. Unless you were a complete coward you wouldn't kick up a fuss about which day it was – what difference could it make?

Aurelius, 2003, p. 47

In the short story titled “Death Constant Beyond Love,” Gabriel García Márquez meditates through his main character, Senator Onesimo Sanchez, upon man's boundless ambition for power. At the onset of the story, it is said that the Senator has only “six months and eleven days to go before his death when he finds the woman of his life” (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2055). What is surprising is that although the Senator is diagnosed with a terminal disease, and he is even given the exact time of his upcoming death, he neither thinks of leaving his political ambitions behind nor of spending his remaining time with his wife and five children; instead, he dedicates his whole being to his ongoing political campaign to be re-elected senator for the third time. The author's portrayal of the Senator's character draws attention to the concept of “will to power,” which is defined by Nietzsche as the basic human drive that is the limitless desire to impose one's own will on others.

“Death Constant beyond Love” first appeared in García Márquez's collection of short stories titled *The Incredible and Sad History of Candida Erendira and Her Wicked Grandmother* (1972). The collection's very long title was also subtitled “Siete cuentos” (Seven Short Stories); and among the six other stories, “Death Constant beyond Love” stands out as an exception due to the narrative's reliance on stark realism. To Frank Dauster, “the story is a powerful political satire [which is] a characteristic of García Márquez's mature work” (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 470). In a similar vein, Regina Janes argues that in his later works, García Márquez “integrates personal obsessions, literary allusion, and political interpretation,” especially after publishing his groundbreaking work, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in 1967 (1984, p. 98). Concerning the function of politics in the author's early works, Janes says, “political issues are either allegorised or serve as an indistinct backdrop against which a conflict between characters or within a character is enacted” (1984, p. 97). It is clearly seen that the issue of power politics is fully foregrounded, serving as the main theme in “Death Constant beyond Love.” Dauster claims that the story [is] a psychological study of the awakening to lust at an unfortunately advanced age of Senator Onesimo Sanchez” (1973, p. 470). The story appears to be a realistic exception because unlike the other six stories in the collection, it lacks the Márquezian fantasy elements, or fantastic laughter – except for the flying paper birds; yet, it still displays the author's signature dark humour. García Márquez directs his

critical eye on his fictional corrupt characters, the desolate, sterile setting, and the lethargic townsfolk who do nothing to change their miserable plight.

In fact, the story's title tells much about the futility of man's desires and passions against the inevitable, omnipotent death. While titling his work, García Márquez subverts the Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo's seventeenth-century sonnet, "Amor constante más allá de la muerte" ("Love Constant beyond Death"), the theme of which is everlasting love against death. García Márquez reverses the places of the two nouns – "Love" and "Death" – to indicate that what conquers all is death, not love. Thus, at the very beginning, the author presents death as the sole invincible ending awaiting all human beings without any exception. Indeed, quoting the last part of Margaret Jull Costa's English translation of Quevedo's sonnet might be helpful in understanding how the dynamics of subversion operate in García Márquez's story:

*Soul that was prison to a god,
Veins that fueled such fire,
Marrow that gloriously
burned-
The body they will leave,
Though not its cares;
Ash they will be, but filled
with meaning;
Dust they will be, but dust in love*

The ending lines of Quevedo's poem put emphasis on the ever-enduring quality of love compared to the transience of worldly ambitions. Obviously, the poetic persona believes in the immortality of the human soul and that the soul, transcending death, remains capable of carrying the indestructible residues of love—depicted as ashes and dust in the poem. While in Quevedo's poem it is love that transcends all, in Márquez's story it is death.

"Death Constant Beyond Love" is set in a fictional town called "Rosal del Virrey" (The Rosebush of the Viceroy). The name is ironic because the landscape of the town is dry and desert-like even though it is by the sea; and the only rose one can see is worn by Senator Sanchez on his jacket. Although the image of the sea is traditionally associated with the notions of procreation, regeneration, fertility, abundance and purification, this particular town yields the exact opposite impression. There is no sign of productivity, and the only wharf is haunted by smugglers at night. The townsfolk, who are periodically visited by Senator Sanchez during his electoral campaigns, are grossly marked by stagnation and inactivity. Although the Senator fulfils none of the promises that he makes to the town dwellers over the years, it never occurs to these people to question the Senator's unjust illegal actions or to hold him responsible for his misdeeds and lies. Indeed, the opening of his public speech, which is laden with

populist elements, and which he delivers with disbelief in his own words, reads as follows:

We are here for the purpose of defeating nature. We will no longer be foundlings in our own country, orphans of God in a realm of thirst and bad climate, exiles in our own land. We will be different people, [...], we will be happy and great people. (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2056)

What is noteworthy is that although the Senator has been painting the same fake future in his memorized speech for many years, his audience listens to him in a state of great exuberance as if he were saying new things, and ready to make, this time, substantial reforms and investments that will change the poor socio-economic profile of the society for the better. Thus, the Senator's helpers set up, for the third time, the same old cardboard city representing a prosperous city that will obviously never come; yet the townspeople neither protest nor give up voting for the Senator. The cardboard city displaying skyscrapers and ocean liners is used to convince the townsfolk to blindly vote for the Senator once more. On one level, this worn-out, fake city symbolizes the corruption and dishonesty of all politicians like Sanchez; yet on a more sophisticated level, the reference is made to the transience of existence and the mortality of man. This city could be thought of as a reworking of the timeless metaphor of the world as an illusory stage, where no action by man, whether evil or virtuous, bears any significance, since death and oblivion await in the end. The author relates this idea of the triviality of human life and especially of the futility of man's boundless ambition for power to the Senator's admiration for Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who was the last of the five emperors of the Golden Age of the Roman Empire, was also a prominent Stoic philosopher. He is Sanchez's only role model, his source of inspiration in political, social, and personal matters. The Emperor's *Meditations* has been the Senator's bedside reading for a long time. Particularly, after being told about the brevity of his time on earth, Sanchez's reading of the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius' reflections on the inevitability of death and oblivion and the futility of struggles for power turn into an obsession. The emperor's fearless stance against death, his understanding of death as a part of the natural process, and his conviction about the vanity of worldly power – no matter how great – are all reflected in the following words: "Death is not to be feared. [...] It is a natural process, part of the continual change that forms the world. 'Soon you will be dead and none of it will matter'" (Aurelius, 2003, p. xlii). Gregory Hays, the writer of the Introduction to *Meditations*, connects the emperor's notions on death and oblivion to transience by stating that "All things change or pass away, perish and are forgotten" (Aurelius, 2003, p. xlii). As an ardent follower of the stoic emperor, one expects the Senator to be a person who has strength and courage in misfortune. Yet, despite his rational knowledge of these facts, when he is informed that he will die by the following Christmas, Sanchez grows

desperate and fearful; instead of assuming the courageous stance of his role model, Sanchez attempts to cheat death through his erotic passion for Laura Farina, to no avail. His lustful deeds lead to a huge scandal that destroys his seemingly unblemished political reputation, and he dies in desperate fury.

The epigraph to this article, which is taken from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, anticipates that the Senator dies as a "complete coward" for neither his educational background – he is a graduate of the highly prestigious Göttingen University – nor his history in active politics, or even his family prevent Sanchez from becoming involved in treachery and adultery. In *Meditations*, the philosopher-emperor categorizes human character as "dark, womanish, obstinate, wolf, sheep, child, fool, cheat, buffoon, salesman, tyrant" (Aurelius, 2003, p. 43). It is seen that among the emperor's character types, "cheat" and "tyrant" are the most fitting nouns defining Sanchez's personality traits. Added to his tyrannical and cheating character, the "wolf" at the beginning of the story gradually becomes the "sheep" and dies as the "fool." Obviously, Sanchez learns nothing from the emperor's notes on the significance of being a rational, honest, just, humble ruler, who is aware of the transience of worldly power and the mortality of man. The emperor's reminders to himself about the transience of life and the importance of being a good person read as follows: "Not to live as if you had endless years ahead of you. Death overshadows you. While you are alive and able – be good" (Aurelius, 2003, p. 41). However, unabashed Sanchez ignores the emperor's reflections on the concept of mortality, starts living as if he were immortal and recklessly falls in love with Laura Farina. Sanchez's infatuation with Laura might be interpreted as his vain attempt to cheat death. Ekaterina Poljakova's comment on Dostoevsky's ideas on the nature of human love in *A Writer's Diary* is that knowledge of the inevitability of death turns human love and happiness, even the entire humanity itself into nothingness: "And no matter how rationally, joyously, righteously, and blessedly humanity might organize itself on earth, it will all be equated tomorrow to that same empty zero" (2017, p. 124). Dostoevsky calls death "[an] enduring tyrant" and finds all kinds of material and sensual ambitions and passions – power, status, wealth, love and hatred – as meaningless, miserable attempts. Indeed, the end of the disillusioned Senator, weeping like a helpless, raging child in the presence of death, once more justifies Dostoevsky's characterization of death as the "enduring tyrant."

The Senator's obsession with the nineteen-year-old Laura causes him to fall into the clutches of Laura's criminal pharmacist father, who represents another dimension of the corruption in the town. Nelson Farina does not hesitate to sacrifice his own daughter to escape from justice; he offers her to the Senator in return for a fake identity card. This unscrupulous deal between the father and the Senator might be interpreted with reference to Dimitar Vatsov's discussion on the interrelation between power and freedom. Vatsov's article centers around

Nietzsche's and Foucault's views related to the issue. In Foucault's later works, Vatsov argues, power is most often identical with government. Indeed, in his seminal essay, "The Subject and Power," Foucault defines "the exercise of power as a mode of action upon the actions of others. To govern in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others" (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). Freedom, which, to Foucault, means resistance, is precisely complementary to power because without resistance, Foucault claims, there would only be a one-sided determination, not power. Considering the Foucauldian connection between power and freedom, it seems that the Senator is the one who holds power against Laura's father at first. The Senator continually rejects Nelson Farina's plea for a fake identity card until he falls in love with Laura: "Nelson Farina had begged for his help in getting a false identity card which would place him beyond the reach of the law" (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2057). In that case, power is at the hands of Sanchez, and he consistently resists accepting Nelson's unlawful demands as if he were an honest politician, a true believer in both legality and morality. Conversely, since Sanchez is a corrupt opportunist, he does almost nothing for his voters unless he receives a satisfying profit serving his political ambitions. Nevertheless, when Laura, "the most beautiful woman in the world" (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2056), enchants Sanchez with her youth and charm, Nelson Farina seizes power and thereby the freedom to play with Sanchez, to make the Senator yield to his wishes. It is seen that, while to Foucault, resistance-freedom (that is, the freedom to resist) is a precondition of power, to Nietzsche it is not: "instinct for freedom [is] the will to power" (1887/2006, p. 59). For Nietzsche,

[the] most fearful and fundamental desire in man, his drive to power – this drive is called freedom" (1968, p. 383). In addition, Nietzsche claims that one who has a higher degree of power also has the privilege of "freedom from good and evil and from true and false". (1901/1968, p. 140)

In the case of García Márquez's story, Sanchez's obsession with Laura not only inflames Nelson's instinct for freedom but also allows him to gain control over the actions of Sanchez; thus, the power/freedom binary switches places, and Nelson becomes the one who has a higher degree of power over the Senator. Considering the Nietzschean power/freedom proposition, which bestows upon the more powerful person freedom from all moral codes, one cannot help thinking about the degree of corruption in Nelson's already vile character. Indeed, Márquez's brief depiction of Nelson Farina's criminal personality reveals a murderer and a pure embodiment of evil, even when he is assumed to be a Nietzschean herd man against the *Übermensch* (superhuman) Sanchez:

[Farina] had drawn and quartered his first wife. He had escaped from Devil's Island and appeared in Rosal del Virrey on a ship [where he had met] a beautiful and blasphemous woman [...] by whom he had a daughter. The woman died of

natural causes [...] and she didn't suffer the fate of the other, whose pieces had fertilized her own cauliflower patch, ... (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2056)

Nevertheless, when Sanchez accepts to provide Farina with the fake identity card in return for Laura, the roles change, and while Sanchez becomes the herd man, Nelson turns out to be the *Übermensch*. This dirty deal between the two corrupt characters also proves that both lack the impulse or conscience to distinguish between what is commonly believed to be good and evil or true and false; and apparently, they have no intention to act in the right way either.

In "Nietzsche on The Value of Power and Pleasure," Robert Shaver discusses Nietzsche's conceptualization of power in relation to pleasure and higher types. While examining the deeper meanings of Nietzsche's will to power and its connection to the essence of life, Shaver mainly focuses on Beyond Good and Evil:

...life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and exploitation [...] Exploitation belongs to the essence of what lives [...] it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will of life. (Nietzsche qtd in Shaver, 2022, p. 9)

Shaver comes to the conclusion that "since life is essentially will to power, the enhancement of life requires enhancing power" (2022, p. 9). The power struggle between the Senator and Nelson Farina ends with Farina's victory; that is to say, he enhances his life by enhancing his power over the Senator's weakness – which is his desperate attempt to cheat death by exploiting the youth and beauty of Laura Farina. But how could a criminal figure like Nelson strengthen his hand against the omnipotent Sanchez? The answer is that Nelson exploits his own daughter's youth and "unusual beauty" just like Sanchez does. In addition, before sending Laura to Sanchez in her best attire, he tells Laura to put on a chastity belt and keeps the key to himself to guarantee the promised fake identity card. In doing so, Nelson not only obtains his new identity card but also punishes the Senator for lusting after Laura; otherwise, he has no real concern for his daughter's "honour" (as per the story's patriarchal setting) and no intention of protecting her against any potential sexual violence. Upon noticing the chastity belt, the Senator, who is on the verge of death, is at first enraged, but when he questions Laura concerning what she and his voters truly think about his personality and public image, he calms down. The dialogue between the two reads as follows:

'What have you heard about me?'
'Do you want the honest to-God truth?'
'The honest to-God truth.'
'[...] 'They say you're worse than the rest because you are different.' (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2060)

The honest public opinion of his character overshadows “his most hidden instincts” for a while, and he tells Laura that he will settle Farina’s identity trouble. In addition, he tells Laura that he does not want the key; he only wants her to lie next to him. This chastity-belt key, which is kept by Nelson, might be briefly interpreted with reference to the definitions of the Nietzschean power-pleasure relationship by Maudemarie Clark and Bernard Reginster, respectively. To Clark, “[p]ower is the ability to satisfy one’s desires” (1990, p. 211). Whereas for Reginster, “[t]he will to power is the will to seek out and overcome resistance to satisfying one’s desires” (2006, p. 132). The epiphanic moment in the story is the scene where the Senator fails to satisfy his lustful desires because that very moment coincides with his realization of not only Nelson’s victory but also of his loss of power. Obviously, Sanchez’s “most hidden instinct” is his fear of death. Thus, both furious and helpless, Sanchez sinks into his inner world, into his dark solitude, while Laura lies beside him silently. The Senator ponders upon his legacy, the way his name will be remembered, and his posthumous public reputation. In order to relax and encounter his fate courageously like a Stoic, he closes his eyes and starts thinking of Marcus Aurelius’ ideas on the inevitability of death and oblivion: “Remember, [Sanchez] remembered, that whether it’s you or someone else, it won’t be long before you’ll be dead and it won’t be long before your name won’t even be left” (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2060). The emperor’s words remind Sanchez of the vanity of his boundless ambition for power and his attempts to leave behind an everlasting glorious name. He also painfully realizes that the all-powerful enduring force is death, rather than love: “...six months and eleven days later he would die [...], debased and repudiated because of the public scandal with Laura Farina and weeping with rage at dying without her” (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2060).

García Márquez’s portrayal of Senator Onesimo Sanchez as a corrupt politician who has tyrannical tendencies might be traced as a recurrent archetype in the author’s literary oeuvre. According to José Anadon, García Márquez’s description of the personality traits of his tyrant characters, especially their endings, displays certain similarities. Based on many interviews with the author, Anadon states that the feeling García Márquez’s tyrant characters evokes in the audience is neither “outrage” nor “shock,” but “pity”:

...the tyrant is a man to be pitied. Think of it, after all his excesses he should not be condemned, we should not even feel outrage or shock, but pity. In García Márquez’s view, the dictator is both a victimizer and a victim. In this respect, he looks just like [...] any of us. And anybody who has or has had power in his or her hands probably knows its pitfalls. Power attracts, and is sought with passion. Yet power is one of the greatest illusions for human beings, the source of the greatest feelings of emptiness in life. (1989, pp. 23-24)

Likewise, Senator Onesimo Sanchez embodies all the characteristics García Márquez attributes to his fictional dictators. At first, he is the victimizer of his

loyal poor voters who do not give up re-electing him despite his unfulfilled promises and lies. Sanchez's communication with the helpless people of "Rosal del Virrey" and his hypocritical strategies are based on profit maximization or, to put it more precisely, on the principle of taking everything without giving anything in return. Obviously, a customary policy for the Senator prior to the elections is to walk around his disadvantaged voters and to seem concerned with their various needs and problems: "The senator listened to them good-naturedly and he always found some way to console everybody without having to do them any difficult favors" (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2057). Among these easy favors the scene where the Senator agrees to give a donkey to a needy woman whose husband left her and his six children to work "on the Island of Aruba" is noteworthy. The scene is pathetic as well as humorous. The woman wants the donkey to carry water from the "Hanged Man's Well." After a short while, one of the Senator's men brings the woman "a donkey with a campaign slogan written in indelible paint on its rump so that no one would ever forget that it was a gift from the senator" (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2057). Thus, the Senator exploits not just the present miserable condition of his voters but also their future; and more importantly, he is exploiting the townspeople together with his accomplices, whom the author calls "the important people of Rosal del Virrey" (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2058). The Senator meets with his corrupt supporters just before the election day to explain and warn them about what would befall them in case he fails to be re-elected; meanwhile, the senator is watching the movement of the paper birds flying around the room with the help of an electric fan. The Senator says:

We, of course, can't eat paper birds. You and I know that the day there are trees and flowers in this heap of goat dung, the day there are shad instead of worms in the water holes, that day neither you nor I will have nothing to do here, do I make myself clear? (Márquez, 1970/1999, p. 2058).

A final discussion on the above quotation, prior to the concluding remarks, appears to be necessary to see the scope of corruption among the local administrators. It is evident that the well-being of the Senator and his accomplices depends on doing nothing to improve the life standards of the townsfolk. The Senator speaks to his subordinates in a sickly manner partly because of his illness, but mostly because he knows how to manipulate them as well as their equally corrupt counterparts in other towns in the desert. In brief, the Senator makes his audience fully grasp that their sole way of protecting their present wealthy status as the privileged ruling elite hinges on keeping the townsfolk destitute, without allowing any improvements that might lead to prosperity. To put it another way, the Senator should always be the absolute decision-maker governing the compliant townspeople. In Foucauldian terms, that kind of rule is not power but "one-sided determination," for such power lacks resistance as in the case of the submissive townsfolk of "Rosal del Virrey." Yet, Nelson Farina's

resistance to power, which is represented by Senator Onesimo Sanchez, enables Farina to achieve freedom and hence to become the one who has a higher degree of power than Sanchez. The criminal Farina takes full advantage of the dying Sanchez's weakness resulting from his irresistible passion for Laura Farina. Nelson Farina's victory over the Senator confirms Nietzsche's power/freedom equation; that is, freedom is power and power is freedom. Perhaps, it is not cancer but rather losing his will to power which costs Sanchez his will to life; and certainly, it is love that leads Sanchez to yield to death in tears, agony and rage. Thus, García Márquez subverts the ashes and dust of the everlasting love in Fransisco de Quevedo's poem to the ashes and dust of shame at the end of his story.

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